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## Colin Rowe and another Aalto

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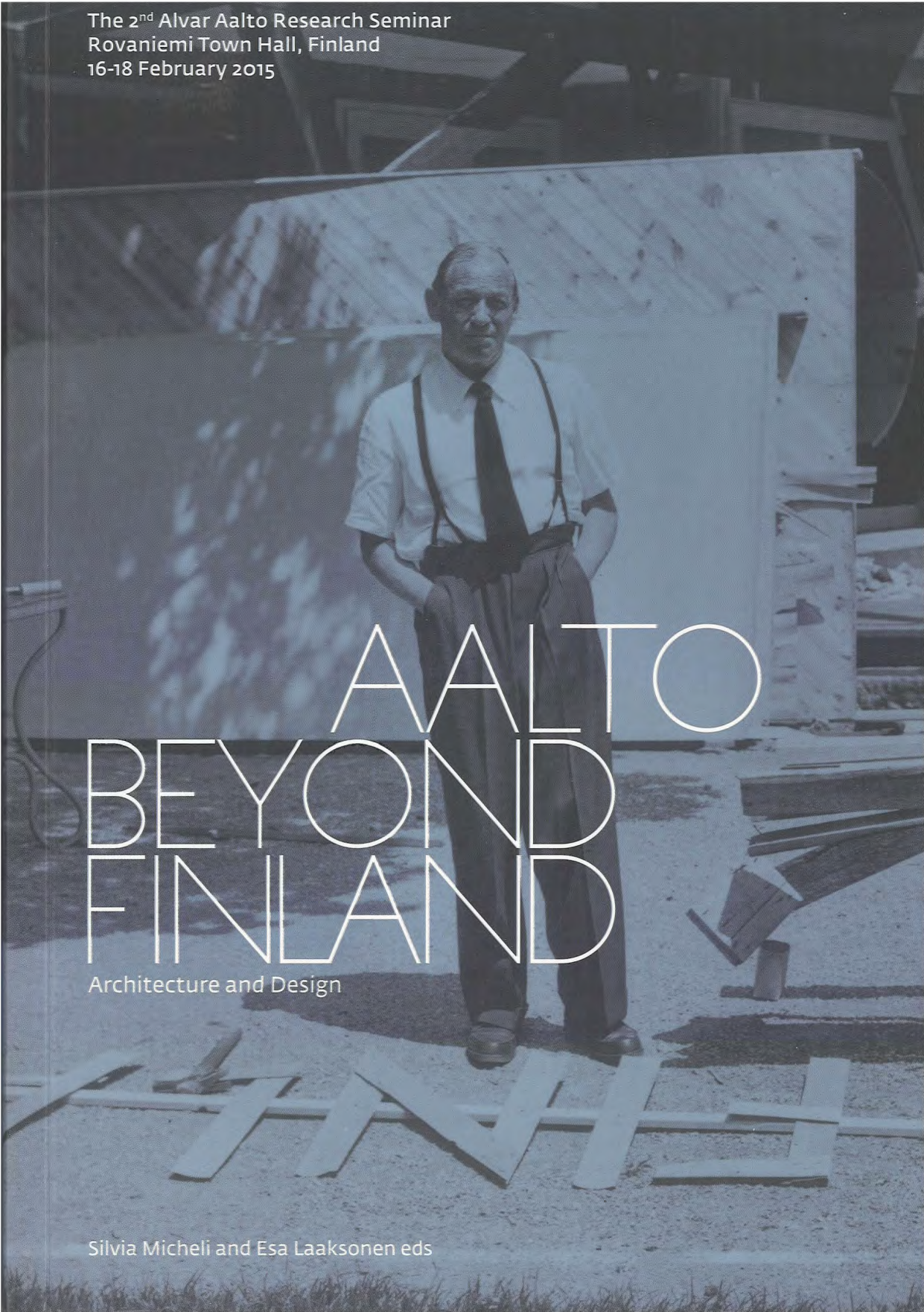
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The 2<sup>nd</sup> Alvar Aalto Research Seminar  
Rovaniemi Town Hall, Finland  
16-18 February 2015

# AALTO BEYOND FINLAND

Architecture and Design

Silvia Micheli and Esa Laaksonen eds



# Colin Rowe and another Aalto

Daniel Naegele, Iowa State University (USA)

On the 29<sup>th</sup> of May 1995, the preeminent British-American architectural theorist Colin Rowe wrote to his friend Michael Spens in Scotland, sending him a postcard of Alvar Aalto's library at Mt. Angel Abbey. 'I send you a present from Oregon,' he began, 'James Tice took me here the other day and I became a convert: and I don't mean to the Order of St Benedict but to this particular Aalto library. But have you seen it?' He continued:

*It's on a butte which you approach through a forest with stations of the cross, all suggestively Italian; and if, following this, the monastic buildings are nothing to write home about, the extreme reticence of the library suddenly becomes a consummation of the site. Screened or veiled by dark existing trees you can scarcely see it; but, all the same, it's very modest and the scarcely disclosed vertical surface collaborates with the horizontal surface of the butte to emphasize, without any exaggeration, the very powerful view westwards over the valley. But you gotta go look. I never expected to be impressed. I never liked Aalto at M.I.T., but all this leaves me extremely emotionné.<sup>1</sup>*

Spens was a devoted follower of Alvar Aalto and eventually would establish an international committee to restore his Viipuri Library in Russia. Spens was also a scholar of landscape architecture and had recently sent Rowe a copy of his 1994 *Complete Landscape Designs and Gardens of Geoffrey Jellicoe*. And though what Rowe wrote about Aalto and Mt. Angel undoubtedly was intended to speak at one and the same time to both these Spens' enthusiasms, the letter is nevertheless sincere, revealing sentiments about Aalto Rowe had never before expressed.

There are and have been five built works by Aalto in the U.S.A., but after 1951—that is, after Rowe's arrival in the U.S. and after the demise of the 1939 Finnish pavilion at the New York World's Fair—there remained only two 'entirely Aalto' buildings in North America: the Baker House dormitory at M.I.T. completed in 1949 and the Mt. Angel Library in Oregon completed in 1970.<sup>2</sup> Only twenty years separate construction of the two works, but forty-three years elapsed between the time Rowe visited M.I.T. around 1952 and the time he visited Mt. Angel in 1995. Though he expressed his dislike of Baker house on several occasions during that time, but not until 1995, and then only in a private letter, did he voice his elation with the later work.

Rowe first saw the M.I.T. dormitory some time in 1952. He attended Yale University during the 1951-52 academic year; and beginning in June 1952 he travelled for a full year across North America with his friend and colleague Brian Richards. His trips included a visit to Harvard, and though he makes no mention of it in his letters, undoubtedly he saw the newly completed Baker House shortly after its erection.

Campuses were of great interest to Rowe. They were urban designs in miniature and Baker House offered one response—not one that Rowe liked—to the prevailing post-war concern for the relationship of new building to established traditional context. At the same time, with its ‘objective whimsy’ and warm palette of red brick and wood, it offered a more humane, less techno-mechanical architecture to a world recently devastated by war.

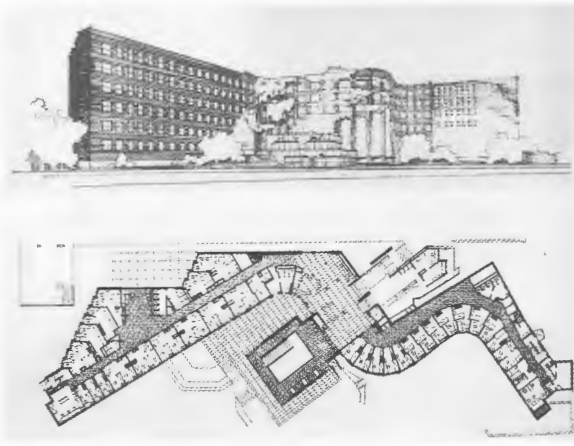
The Modern movement of the 1920s and 1930s had allied its efforts with technology, convinced that advanced technology would greatly benefit mankind. In 1939-45, World War II brought humanity to the brink of extinction. After the war, technology was necessarily suspect and in Europe Modern architecture’s alliance with it was dissolved –temporarily. Yet it was important to architects to retain the principles of Modern architecture even if dismissing its forms and materials.

Le Corbusier was the principle leader of Modern movement architecture and the modern architect who most fascinated Rowe and many northern European architects at the time. Before the war, Le Corbusier had aligned Modern architecture with industry; after the war, he rejected industrial slickness in favour of an archaic, *brut* aesthetic, opening the post-war period with three a-technological buildings that proved canonical even before their completion: the Unité d’habitation at Marseille, the chapel at Ronchamp, and Maisons Jaoul. Many of Rowe’s contemporaries in England, including some who had experienced the horrors of a mechanized war first-hand, followed this lead.

Of these three buildings, Le Corbusier’s eccentric chapel at Ronchamp was the best known, though the Unité—a more normative approach—was employed time and again as a model for much-needed housing. The English preference for picturesque and detail made Le Corbusier’s suburban Maisons Jaoul an attractive approach. The Unité and the Maisons Jaoul provided two answers to the ‘How to build’ question, answers particularly appealing to the English. Less inclined to follow Le Corbusier, American architects were apt to follow the teachings of Gropius or Mies, German refugees who headed Harvard and IIT respectively. Mies’ Farnsworth House was completed in 1951 and American variations soon followed—the work of Gordon Bunshaft, for instance, or the Mies-But-With-Colored-Brick GM Tech Centre campus of Eero Saarinen. Rejecting personal expression, this Miesian approach involved the extensive use of mechanically honed, industrially produced metal.<sup>3</sup> And though in Rowe’s England there was mild interest in its form and monumentality—evident, especially, in the work of the Smithsons’ high school at Hunstanton<sup>4</sup>—the English way clearly favoured Le Corbusier’s Unité and Maisons Jaoul. Both, however, were uncompromising and brutal—qualities Le Corbusier consciously cultivated. This was not the British way, however, nor was it Scandinavian. The dilemma rudeness where there was a desire for kindness—was made evident in 1955 when Reyner Banham labelled certain significant post-war buildings of Northern Europe and the USA ‘brutalist’ in an article he titled ‘New Brutalism.’<sup>5</sup> What to do now?

Scandinavian Rationalism offered an antidote to the harshness exuded in Le Corbusier’s contemporary building and Aalto’s work, though hardly rationalist, was particularly appealing. His architecture aligned with Le Corbusier’s Jaoul houses materially and formally, if not theoretically. Comprised of a sensuous palette that revealed in both craft and the nature of materials, it solved functional problems, permitted a modicum of self-expression, and exuded a special beauty and warmth rarely seen in twentieth century building. Aalto’s architecture—populist and elitist at one the same time—did not affront but delighted ‘the people’. This delight, however, so evident at M.I.T., was not Rowe’s delight. He found the serpentine House lacking, and understood Baker House not as solution for urban building but as exemplar of the problem modern architecture posed to a cohesive, harmonious urban condition.

In his 1956-57 ‘Neo-Classical and ‘Modern Architecture I,’ Rowe cited Eero Saarinen’s proposal for an auditorium and chapel in a tree-enclosed plaza at MIT as an example of the ‘broader, more popular, and dubiously classicizing movement’,<sup>6</sup> newly evident across



America at the time. Together with Baker House, they epitomized what Rowe termed the 'object building'. 'It's particularly after World War II that the object building took over,' Rowe noted in a 1989 interview with Richard Ingersoll.

*In terms of campus design one may suspect that it began at MIT around 1950 with the Aalto dorm and Saarinen's Kresge Auditorium and chapel, and that after that every campus from coast to coast decided it had to turn itself into an exhibition of unrelated works by what were thought to be prominent architects.<sup>7</sup>*

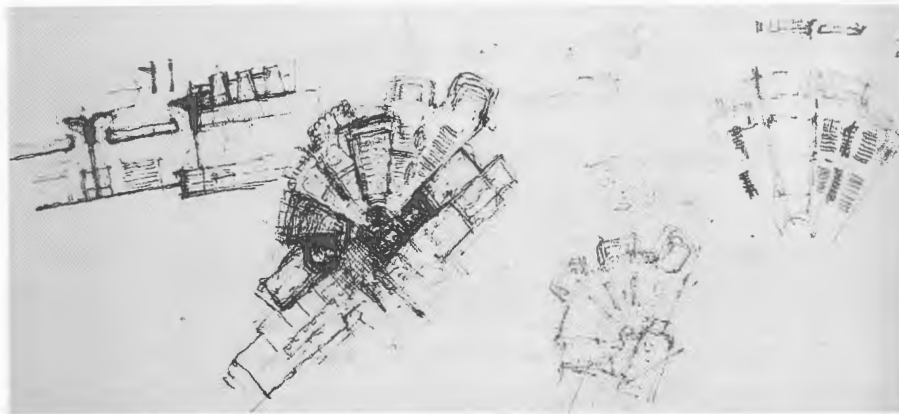
Wondrous, with a convincing internal logic and a sensuality unusual in post-war America, Baker House has no 'façade' or suggestion of frontality. Shouting—but softly and in a kinder, gentler, brick-and-wood voice—the dormitory left little doubt as to Aalto's attitude towards the existing M.I.T. campus. With its sinuous form, attached rectilinear dining hall, and spectacularly appended exterior staircase—Rowe declared the appendage 'very much a picturesque annex to the building which it serves'<sup>8</sup>—it assumed a site remote from and unrelated to the fabric of M.I.T.'s Beaux-Arts campus. Depicted by Aalto as partially cloaked in vegetation, quietly disregarding its manmade surroundings, it identified not with the grid of the M.I.T. campus, but rather with the 'nature' of the nearby St. Charles River, a diagonal view of which is often given as reason for Aalto's signature serpentine form.

If Baker House was, for Rowe, a prime example of architecture that in form and attitude ignored traditional manmade context, Siegfried Giedion's reverence for Aalto could only have encouraged Rowe's dismissal of his work. Rowe strongly disagreed with both Giedion's 'space-time' history of architecture and with his insistence—evident in the pervasive suggestions of his illustrative text—on relentlessly aligning architecture with advanced technology, as the logical result of the *zeitgeist*, a 'phantom' Rowe did not believe in. But Giedion—perhaps the most influential architectural critic in the English-speaking world at the time—'endorsed' Aalto's dormitory for exactly the reasons Rowe disliked it. To the second edition of his *Space, Time and Architecture: The growth of a new tradition* (1949), he added a long chapter on Alvar Aalto<sup>9</sup>—longer than the chapters he had written on Mies, Gropius, Le Corbusier or Wright. It featured prominently the recently completed Baker House, casting it as the latest work in Aalto's already extensive *œuvre*. In addition, the chapter included images of the Turku Turun-Sanomat, the Paimio tuberculosis sanatorium, the Viipuri Library, the Kauttua terraced housing, a factory in Sunila, the Villa Mairea, and the Finnish Pavilion at the New York's World Fair, a largely interior affair that Frank Lloyd Wright had declared a 'work of genius.' This illustrative text reinforces and legitimates Aalto's idiosyncratic curves. It shows a full-page, early Ezra Stoller photograph of the undulating interior wall of

Left: Baker House, street elevation facing, at a distance, the Charles River.

Right: Rendering of exterior and plan of entry floor of Baker House. Peter Reed, ed., *Alvar Aalto: Between Humanism and Materialism* (NY: The Museum of Modern Art, 1998)





the New York World's Fair Finnish Pavilion, a photograph which leads directly, with a turn of the page, to an aerial view of the undulating exterior wall of Baker House. These seemingly organic, natural undulations are accompanied by images of the curvaceous coastline of Finland, Aalto's famed curved glass vases, and the undulating ceiling of the Viipuri library, all of which create an 'image context' in which Aalto's curves seem normative. In addition to this illustrative text, Giedion champions Aalto's architecture as the embodiment of the Finnish atmosphere, as manifestation of its mood and 'intensity of life'. In doing so, he—perhaps unwittingly—removes it from the realm of the classical tradition.

But why was Rowe so delighted with Mt. Angel? It, too, featured Aalto's signature undulations, but where at M.I.T. the wave was thorough and affected the entire building, at Mt. Angel the big bow is on one side only. The visitor enters not from this curved, three-story side, but on the opposite side—on what one later learns is the upper level, 'screened or veiled by dark existing trees.' The entrance is indicated by a simple flat canopy in the middle of the modest, single story façade, what Rowe calls a 'scarcely disclosed vertical surface.' This entry facade fits comfortably among the existing low buildings of the monastery, 'collaborating,' Rowe says, 'with the horizontal surface of the butte to emphasise, without any exaggeration, the very powerful view westwards over the valley.'

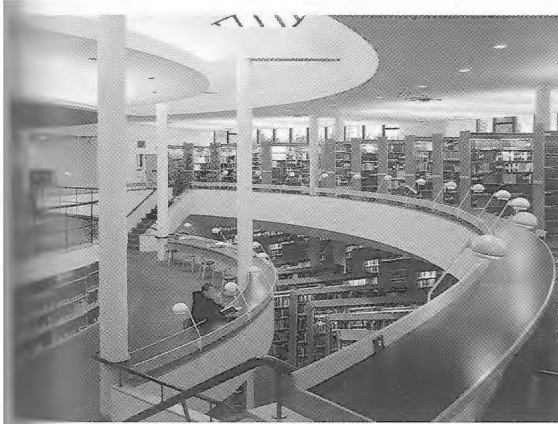
Immediately outside the entrance, the library locks in place with both man-made and natural environments. Inside the building, however, once one traverses the skylit throat of the entry lobby, all bonds are broken. The interior is white and filled with light. And while radial organization insists on a sweeping horizontal expansiveness in plan, a similar expansiveness is promoted in section as the building opens downward to multiple levels.

That is to say, at Mt. Angel, a promenade proceeds through a dark, veiled, low and dense entrance and lobby to a reading room of abundant light: open, high and expansive. The entry relates to its context of small monastic buildings and butte top. The three-story, fanned elevation of the building—which is the back wall of the inside of the library and the building's front face seen from the Willamette Valley below—relates to the immense, almost limitless space that it overlooks.<sup>8</sup> The entry side is flat; the valley side wavy.

Rowe admired this kind of 'two-faced' architecture, design capable of addressing the very different conditions of its context. The library exemplifies a strategy that Rowe advocated for urban issues, a strategy that would not permit buildings to be only objects but insisted that they address contradictory values. 'Render unto Caesar those things that are Caesar's and unto God those things that are God's.'

A *parti* similar to that of Mt. Angel was used for libraries at Seinäjoki in 1960, at Rovaniemi in 1961, and at the Helsinki University of Technology in 1964—the same year Aalto used it in Oregon. The sites for each of the three earlier buildings are not hillsides, though the library at Rovaniemi is accompanied by a hill. In each there is a similar three-part configu-

Above: Mt. Angel Abbey Library. Early sketches. Peter Reed, ed., *Alvar Aalto: Between Humanism and Materialism* (NY: The Museum of Modern Art, 1998)



ration comprised of a bar, a focal point perched on the edge of the bar, and a fan shape radiating out from this point orienting the reading room toward the most desirable light. This fan typically featured a roof and ceiling that flared upward from the pivot point, elements construed to reinforce the radial motif.

At Mt. Angel, though, a dramatically flaring roof was not necessary. Aalto expanded the building in plan by fanning its back wall out. He expanded it in section by extending the building down, not up. On a hillside, the library's 'front' wants to be one story; its 'back' wants to be three. The single story entrance side is scaled to agree with the other abbey buildings. The three-story Willamette Valley side is built to address the vast landscape that it faces. The building is thus attached to both the abbey buildings above and the Willamette Valley below. Despite its sinuous configuration and its dramatic section, it is not an 'object' building, rather it employs all of the wonderful strategies Aalto cultivated for nearly five decades to evoke the magnificence of its setting. It is Aalto, but unlike Baker House it accepts and promotes its context, employing it to great benefit.

In an unpublished 1977 autobiographical sketch, Colin Rowe wrote of his particular conception of urban design' noting that this conception

*has always been anti-Corbusian, contextualist (a Cornell word), and eclectic. French gardens, pre-Columbian sites, Alvar Aalto, Gunnar Asplund, Parisian hotels particularly, the Villa Adriana at Tivoli, and an inordinate number of pieces implicating ideas of accommodation, have always been part of its stock-in-trade; and it has never shown any favor towards allegedly, 'neutral' research.*

The 'good' Aalto of Mt. Angel exuded accommodation and enhanced the wonder of its architecture in being so. The 'bad' Aalto of Baker House employed the immense talents of its genius architect to its own ends, ignoring much that surrounded it.

Aalto in the 1940s differed greatly from Aalto in 1970s. Aalto in the remote American West and on an utterly non-urban site designed differently than he did in the established East on a gridded site dominated by Neo-Classical buildings. The mature sensibilities Rowe cultivated in the forty-five years between Aalto sightings allowed him to find in Aalto's library something he had had little use for in the dormitory, and undoubtedly conjectures made above are related to alterations in both the perceived and the perceiver.

'Beyond Finland' clarifies both the work of Colin Rowe and of Alvar Aalto. Aalto in America—Aalto Beyond Finland—offers no gradations. Unlike in Finland, in America there is no 'in-between' Aalto. Its east coast features 'black'; its west, 'white'. And though removing the middle works at first seems unfair to Aalto, doing so—in America, and through Rowe's eyes—allows one to examine the universal qualities of architecture itself, exclusive

Left: Mt. Angel Abbey Library, interior view.

Right: Mt. Angel Abbey Library. Three story Willamette Valley elevation. Peter Reed, ed., *Alvar Aalto: Between Humanism and Materialism* (NY: The Museum of Modern Art, 1998)



of architecture as belonging to a personality so intimately related to his origins, a place often very different from much of the Western world. For Rowe, it privileges those qualities that admit duplicity as a positive attribute, underscoring an aspect of Aalto's work of great value to Rowe's urban vision.

Marshall McLuhan once noted that 'Fish don't know water exists until beached.'<sup>10</sup> Something similar occurs when Aalto is 'beached' in another land beyond Finland. In Finland, Aalto's architecture seems readily to embody a Finnish attitude, Finnish sensibilities, Finnish emotion. For Rowe, this very personal aspect of Aalto's architecture obscures other essences manifested in the work. In America, Aalto's complex body of work is removed from both its Finnish roots and its evolutionary trail. One sees black and one sees white, and this limited sight allows Aalto's architecture to be understood, if only momentarily, in the logic of other criteria.

Daniel Naegele, PhD, is an architect, an occasional architectural historian, and Associate Professor of Architecture at Iowa State University in the USA. A graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, Yale, and the AA, his writings on Le Corbusier, architectural photography, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Marcel Duchamp have been published worldwide and translated to eight languages. He is currently completing the editing of *The Letters of Colin Rowe* to be published by Artifice in London in 2015.

- 1 Letter from Colin Rowe to Michael Spens dated 29 May 1995. Rowe had been invited by the University of Oregon to apply for the Pietro Belluschi chair and visited Oregon in May 1995 to give the inaugural lecture in the Belluschi festivities. Rowe's former student, James Tice (B.Arch. Cornell, 1968, M.Arch. Cornell (Urban Design) 1970), at the time associate professor of architecture, took him to visit the 1964-70 Mt. Angel Abbey Library in Saint Benedict, Oregon. In an October 5, 2014 email to the author, Tice recalled:

*The idea for a visit to the Mt. Angel Library was in the air since ALL visitors are trundled off to Mt. Angel, Colin being no exception. So I guess it was I who made the suggestion for an outing. I remember the day vividly. Colin, in my Toyota 4Runner, hanging onto the strap above his seat for dear life.*

*Once on site, and as we approached the library, Colin simply said, 'Very cool, isn't it?' So I thought, 'it's actually pretty warm*

*today'—Colin, of course, meant that Aalto's gesture was completely understated [...] The fireworks, of course, were reserved for the INTERIOR and REVERSE side facing Mt. Hood, stepping down the pronounced hill and away from the rather modest quadrangle on the uphill approach side of the site.*

*Walking through the main door (with his cane by that time) Colin wandered into the main reading room without saying a word. Inscrutable as ever. I finally couldn't take it any longer and asked, 'Colin, what do you think?' 'Charming, really charming, don't you think?'*

*On the return home we hit a typical, nasty strip highway, Colin saying 'It (Mt Angel) atones for this...'*

- 2 This excludes the remarkable interior works in NYC and at Harvard.
- 3 Le Corbusier, perhaps seduced in the late 1920s by Pierre Chareau's Maison de Verre, only infrequently employed metal as a principle material in his palette



and mainly when building in Switzerland—specifically in the early 1930s in the Maison Clarté in Geneva, and in the mid 1960s at the Heidi Weber Pavilion in Zürich. He preferred concrete for his large-scale works in Marseille, Lyon, and India. Concrete could structure large buildings and was both 'earthy' and progressive and, in the hands of Le Corbusier, encouraged expressionist tendencies.

- 4 Smithdon High School, Hunstanton, Norfolk, by Peter and Alison Smithson, 1949-54.
- 5 Reynier Banham, 'The New Brutalism', *Architectural Review* (December 1955), 354-361. See also, Banham's book, *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?* (New York: Reinhold and London: Architectural Press, 1966). Rowe reviewed this book together with Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966) in 'Waiting for Utopia,' the Sunday edition of *The New York Times*, September 10, 1967. The review is reprinted in Colin Rowe, ed. Alexander Caragionne, *As I Was Saying* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), vol. 2: 75-78.
- 6 Colin Rowe, 'Neo-Classicism and Modern Architecture I', *Oppositions* 1, 1973, republished in *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1976): 119-138. The essay was written in 1956-57.
- 7 Colin Rowe, 'An Interview with Richard Ingersoll in Rome' *Design Book Review* (1989). Republished in *As I Was Saying* vol. 3: 318-329.
- 8 Colin Rowe, 'Who but Stirling' A review of the Sackler Museum at Harvard'. *Architectural Record*, no. 174 (March 1986). Republished in *As I Was Saying*, vol. 2: 268.
- 9 In the Foreword to the June 1953 third edition of this book, Giedion played down the addition of the chapter on Aalto, saying:

*For the eighth printing (second edition) of Space, Time and Architecture we have merely added some new illustrations, scattered here and there throughout the book; some pages on 'Gustave Eiffel and His Tower'; some additional notes on the works of Robert Maillart; and a chapter on Alvar Aalto.*

In fact, the chapter on Aalto was a substantial 40 pages and nicely complemented Giedion's thesis. The many images of Aalto's curvaceous architecture cooperated with Giedion's great preference for curvaceous construction evident in his illustrative text showing the work of Edgerton, Picasso, Arp, Maillart; the big curves of Le Corbusier at the Pavillon Suisse and his unbuilt League of Nations; Mies' glass tower and the interior of Wright's Johnson Wax; Eiffel and Arnodin, Obus and Bath, Horta and the curved corners of Chicago high-rises. In their propensity for the curvaceous, these modern works of photography, art, engineering and architecture, aligned formally with Giedion's portrayal of both the old — Baroque domes — and the new — contemporary continuous high-speed highways complete with curving 'clover leaves'.

- 10 Throughout *Space Time and Architecture*, Giedion dilutes the potential harshness of modern construction with images of humanely curved construction. Aalto's architecture was perfect for this. His Finnish heritage served Giedion, one suspects, as antidote to the 'big city' architect and the construction of Paris, London, New York, Rome, and Chicago which feature prominently in the book. Curves and wood, when shown in cooperation with the modern aesthetic, proved ideal 'counterweights' to the prevalence of cubic, mass-produced building.
- 11 Marshall McLuhan, *Culture Is Our Business* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan, 1970).